

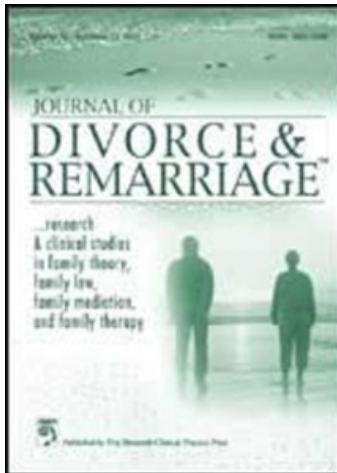
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Validation of a Measure of Intimate Partner Abuse With Couples Participating in Divorce Mediation

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Critics of court mandated divorce mediation have raised awareness of the need for screening measures to assess intimate partner abuse. This study validates a new instrument that is a revised version of the Partner Abuse Scales developed by Walter Hudson in the 1990s. The Relationship Behavior Rating Scale (RBRS) correlates highly with the original scales and subscales developed from the original and RBRS items have equally high reliability. The new scale is a reliable measure for intimate partner abuse in divorce mediation.

KEYWORDS *intimate partner abuse, measurement, divorce, mediation*

There is debate in the mediation literature concerning whether couples with intimate partner abuse (IPA)¹ in their relationship should be mandated or encouraged to mediate contested issues in their divorce (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Although little empirical research has directly addressed this issue, some scholars and practitioners assert that mediation can safely proceed even when there has been IPA, provided that proper methods of screening and accommodations to ensure safety are implemented (Ellis, 2008; Erickson & McKnight, 1990; Gerencser, 1995; Marthaler, 1989; Milne, 2004; Newmark, Harrell, & Salem,

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1995; Pearson, 1997; Rimelspach, 2001; Yellott, 1990). Several important factors to consider in making this determination include if the IPA is in the distant past, if the IPA is limited to minor pushing and shoving, whether both partners engage in it, and if neither feels afraid of the other or is unable to negotiate with the other. If the IPA is unidirectional and the victim is afraid of the perpetrator or afraid to negotiate directly, mediating in separate rooms, on separate days, or over the telephone are options to maintain distance between the victim and perpetrator. These options are contingent, however, on whether the victim wants to move ahead with mediation.

Other researchers and practitioners argue that in couples where IPA is present, mediation should always be avoided (Astor, 1994; Hart, 1990; N. E. Johnson, Saccuzzo, & Koen, 2005). These scholars and practitioners argue that the foundation of mediation is built on roughly equal partners participating in fair negotiations and this assumption is seriously violated by the imbalance of power found in relationships with IPA (Girdner, 1990). Victims are conditioned by fear and manipulation to submit to the abuser's wishes, even if the victim does not agree with the choices or the choices are not in their best interests. In some couples reporting IPA, the abuser gaining control over the abused partner in mediation negotiations might be a greater motivation than cooperating and reaching a collaborative agreement that serves the best interests of the family (Tisher, Bartholomae, Katz, & Landry-Meyer, 2004). The abused partner does not have the same power in the relationship and might agree to terms that are not in his or her best interests to end the mediation as quickly as possible (N. E. Johnson et al., 2005).

In general, most researchers fall somewhere between these two extreme positions (Beck & Frost, 2007; Ellis & Stuckless, 2006; Johnston & Campbell, 1993; Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Salem & Dunford-Jackson, 2008; Ver Steegh & Dalton, 2008). There is general agreement that at the very least there need to be adequate screening measures for IPA in couples attempting mediation (Beck & Sales, 2001; Ellis, 2008; Mathis & Tanner, 1998; Salem & Dunford-Jackson, 2008; Ver Steegh & Dalton, 2008). Court-connected mediation programs have begun screening for IPA and there are several different instruments for doing so. The Conflict Assessment Protocol is an early screening tool developed for parties who are disputing in divorce-related issues (Girdner, 1990). This instrument allows the mediator to assess the level of power each partner has over the other and decide if mediation is appropriate (Girdner, 1990). The Domestic Violence Evaluation (DOVE) is a 19-item instrument designed to assess and manage risks for couples both before and after divorce mediation (Ellis & Stuckless, 2006). An instrument created by Newmark et al. (1995) was compiled from several existing measures including the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979), the Procedural Justice Scale (Roehl, 1988), and the Marital Power and Decision-Making Scale (Blood & Wolfe, 1960). Several additional screening instruments have been created (Erickson & McKnight, 1990; Michigan Supreme Court, 2006; Neilson &

Guravich, 1999), but to date, only one (Ellis & Stuckless, 2006) has been subjected to any empirical research and only with a limited sample.

The Relationship Behavior Rating Scale (RBRS) used to measure IPA in this study is different from previous measures in that it measures a wider range of abusive tactics, including several questions addressing sexual intimidation, assault, and coercion and coercive control. Sexual assault, intimidation, and coercion are important types of abuse that have traditionally been either ignored or only minimally measured in any context (Bergen, 1996, 2004; Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985; Marshall & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2002), but even less so within the mediation context. For example, the recently developed DOVE instrument (Ellis & Stuckless, 2006) includes one question about sexual assault and does not ask about sexual intimidation or coercion. There is one question in the Newmark et al. (1995) study referring to sex; however, it does not relate directly to sexual abuse. The Model Screening Protocol developed for the Michigan Supreme Court (2006) has no questions related to sexual abuse.

A complicating factor in assessing sexual assault, intimidation, and coercion in any context is that these types of abuse are the most difficult form of violence for both the offenders and victims to reveal (Marshall & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2002; Resnick, Kilpatrick, & Lipovsky, 1991). Thus, without asking specific questions, screeners are extremely unlikely to obtain information related to sexual abuse. It is also important to ask specific questions concerning the continuum of sexual abuse (e.g., from rape and assault to intimidation and coercion) to gain a full understanding of the abuse (Basile, 2002).

Gender differences in sexual assault victimization are generally well known and are consistently found in the research literature. Research from the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that women were 94% of victims for all completed rapes and sexual assaults, 91% of victims of attempted rapes, and 89% of victims of attempted sexual assaults (Rennison, 2002). There is, however, a growing concern about the lack of understanding of the sexual victimization of men (Davies, 2002; Hines, 2007; Tewksbury, 2007). Thus, screening both husbands and wives is important to fully understand IPA within a couple mediating issues in a divorce.

Coercive control is a term used to define a pattern of behaviors that can be used by one or both spouses to manipulate and control the actions of the other spouse (M. P. Johnson, 2006, 2008; Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2007). The controlling spouse dictates everyday actions, the use of economic resources, relationships with friends and family, work, educational opportunities, and other activities of the other spouse. Coercive control also relates to other forms of IPA as the control is maintained through acts of physical abuse or violence and through sexual assault, intimidation, or coercion or through threats of various forms of violence (Stark, 2007). It is theorized that coercive controlling behaviors might be important as a motivation for other forms of violence (M. P. Johnson, 2006, 2008). There is now empirical support for this notion (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2008; Tanha, Beck, Figueredo, & Raghavan, in press).

To date there are no standardized measures of coercive control even though it has been acknowledged as important in various forms in the mediation context. Two IPA assessment tools for the mediation context provided a series of questions for this concept (Girdner, 1990; Neilson & Guravich, 1999). Girdner's assessment tool includes questions concerning control over everyday activities (e.g., Does your spouse control most of your daily activities?) and directs the mediator to pay attention to control issues (e.g., Does one spouse control economic resources in a way that is abusive? Is each party able to make decisions about his or her own life, or does one spouse control the other's daily lives and activities? Do examples of anger reveal one party's need to control the other or have the other be submissive?; Girdner, 1990). Neilson and Guravich's (1999) assessment tool includes questions concerning decision making that addresses control (e.g., Who makes decisions about money, parenting, how money is spent, who your friends can be, when you have sex, where and when you can work?) and broader issues of control (e.g., Did your partner manipulate you by telling lies or by offering contradictory instructions? Did you do things for your partner out of fear of criticism or retaliation? Did your partner ever try to frighten or intimidate you, your friends, or your co-workers?). Unfortunately, neither of these instruments has been validated empirically.

By carefully measuring coercive control, mediators can better predict other forms of IPA that possibly exist in the relationship and thus pay close attention to screening for those additional types of abuse. The mediator can then better understand the relationship context in which IPA occurs (Beck & Raghavan, in press) and make better decisions concerning whether a couple can participate in mediation with or without procedural accommodations (Beck, Walsh, Mechanic, & Taylor, in press).

ORIGINAL INSTRUMENT

In 1994, Hudson developed two partner abuse scales to assess IPA: the Partner Abuse Scale: Physical (PASPH), and Partner Abuse Scale: Nonphysical (PASNP). These scales were then partially validated in 1994 (Attala, Hudson, & McSweeney, 1994). Along with the PASPH and the PASNP, the researchers also administered the Index of Clinical Stress (ICS) and the General Contentment Scale (GCS; Attala et al., 1994). Two samples were used. The shelter sample consisted of 90 women reporting IPA and living in a protective shelter; the control sample included a group of 50 nursing students at a community college. The instruments were scored with Likert scales ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*all the time*). Results indicated that the scales were reliable with reliability coefficients using total scores from the combined shelter and control groups as follows: .97 (PASPH), .98 (PASNP), .97 (ICS), and .97 (GCS).

The PASPH and the PASNP (or the earlier form, Index of Spouse Abuse) have been used in numerous studies including a study measuring battering by assessing violence and stress during pregnancy (Talley, Heitkemper, Chicz-Demet, & Sandman, 2006), a study with breast cancer patients and their partners (Segrin et al., 2005), a study of women seeking primary health care (Coker, Smith, McKeown, & King, 2000), and one determining the history of partner abuse in a study of drug-abusing women and their perceptions of power and equality (Fenaughty, 2003).

In this study, the PASNP and PASPH were combined, some questions were reworded or deleted, and some questions were added. The instrument was then validated with a large sample of divorcing couples participating in court-ordered mediation. The former director of the mediation program where the study was conducted, in consultation with the mediation staff, created this new instrument. The newly created instrument was titled the RBRS and maintained nonphysical and physical subscales of the original instruments. The rationale for rewording some of the questions included changing the tense, adding a time frame, and simplifying the language.

The original scale was written in the present tense and was intended for use in clinical settings. Because many of the couples in mediation were in the process of divorce and no longer living together, the language in the RBRS was changed to the past tense. To facilitate accurate reporting, a time frame was added to the instrument. Couples were asked to respond to the questions concerning the behaviors that occurred in the last 12 months. To assess if the couples were still living together, a question was added regarding how many months the couple had lived apart.

The wording of the questions was changed to simplify the language used so that couples with less than a high school education could read and understand them. The rationale for choosing only a subset of questions from the original instrument was to create the shortest instrument possible to ensure compliance because this was given as part of a routine mediation screening protocol. Questions that were considered repetitious in content were deleted and the questions retained covered the broadest range of abusive tactics possible.

The original questions were not separated into domain-specific types of abuse but were instead considered as a total score. Recent research has emphasized the importance of understanding the specific types of abuse used to understand better the context of the relationship in which the abuse occurs (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Thus, in this study the questions were separated into subscales and questions were added to the RBRS to better capture a set of coercively controlling behaviors not fully included in the original instrument (e.g., "Controlled my coming and going," "Put me down").

The director of the mediation program then drafted the revised set of questions and presented it to a panel of four mediators for their expert

advice. Four questions were added and 12 were deleted until the remaining set met approval of the panel.

METHODS

Participants

Participants in this study were clients mandated to the in-house court mediation service in Pima County (Tucson), Arizona between April 1998 and January 2001 to resolve custody and parenting time disputes. The sample was limited to those couples attending mediation for the first time, as a result of a pending divorce ($N = 1,015$ cases; 2,030 individual participants). Excluded from the study were couples returning to mediation for a second attempt at predivorce mediation or to renegotiate issues postdivorce, couples who were never married but were mediating custody or parenting time arrangements for their children, and grandparents negotiating with couples to see their grandchildren. The final sample for this study consisted of those couples for which both husband and wife completed the majority of questions on the RBRS ($n = 864$).

The average age of participants was 36 years for wives and 37 years for husbands. Generally, both wife and husband were employed, although more husbands were employed than wives (79.7% vs. 64.5%). On average, husbands earned approximately double what wives earned (\$24,186 vs. \$12,226). The range of income was also wider for husbands than for wives (\$0–\$240,000 vs. \$0–\$109,000). This was the first marriage for most of the husbands and wives, with only 15.2% of the husbands and 13.9% of the wives having had previous marriages. Children ranged in age from infants to 18 years old, with a mean age of 8 years old. The number of children in the family ranged from one to six with a mean of two children per marriage. The median education level was high school (36.5%) to some college (28.3%); in many of the couples, the husbands and wives had the same education level (41.9%). The participants were predominately ethnically White (60%) and Hispanic (28%). Nearly 23% of the families fell below the 2000 federal poverty level.

Revised Instrument

The RBRS was comprised of 41 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*none of the time*) to 6 (*all of the time*). The items were aggregated into six conceptually coherent domains of IPA based on theoretically derived models of IPA or found in the IPA literature (Figueredo & McCloskey, 1993; Follingstad & DeHart, 2000; M. P. Johnson, 2006; Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2007; Straus & Gelles, 1990; Swanberg, Macke, & Logan, 2007). These six subscales included Psychological Abuse (“Insulted or shamed me in

front of others”); Coercive Control (“Controlled how much money I could have or how I spent it”); Physical Abuse (“Pushed or shoved me around”); Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence (“Broke one or more of my bones”; “Acted like h/she would like to kill me”); and Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion (“Insisted on sex whether I wanted it or not”). Twenty-nine items from the original PASPH and PASNP scales were included in the RBRS and used to conduct the validation study. The RBRS subscales included 6 questions measuring Psychological Abuse, 10 measuring Coercive Control, 5 measuring Physical Abuse, 12 measuring Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence, and 7 measuring Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion. The PASPH and PASNP subscales included 6 questions measuring Psychological Abuse, 6 measuring Coercive Control, 3 measuring Physical Abuse, 10 measuring Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence, and 4 measuring Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion.

Data Analysis: Classical Test Theory

Initial validation of the RBRS was conducted by several methods. First, correlations were run between the 41 items on the RBRS and the 29 original items from the PASPH and PASNP scales. Subscale mean scores were also calculated for each instrument and then correlated. To assess reliability, Cronbach’s alpha reliability estimates of interitem consistency were then calculated for the entire aggregated scale and for each individual subscale score. Criterion validity was measured by correlating the entire aggregated scale and the individual subscale scores for both instruments with the mediators’ dichotomous judgment of whether the case involved IPA or not.

Data Analysis: Item Response Theory

The graded response model (GRM; Samejima, 1997) of item response theory was used to analyze each item’s contribution to both the general latent construct of IPA and the subscale for which the item was assigned by a two-parameter estimation model (Bond & Fox, 2001; Embretson & Reise, 2000). Thus, there were four aggregate score scales of IPA (the RBRS and the PASPH and PASNP for men and for women), and eight individual subscale scores (two for each sex for each of four subscales).

Variables were transformed into factors with multiple levels, and analyzed using the *ltm* package of “R” software for Rasch analysis, which generated fit indexes and estimated information contributions from all scale items underlying the overall IPA latent construct and the latent construct for each scale. RBRS and PASPH and PASNP versions of whole tests and subscales were analyzed under constrained mode, with all items assigned the same estimated slope.

RESULTS

Classical Test Theory

Pearson correlations were computed for the individual subscale scores and for the aggregated scale, which was computed as the mean of all the items (Psychological Abuse; Coercive Control; Physical Abuse; Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion; Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence) for each sex independently between the PASPH and PASNP scales and the new RBRS scale (see Table 1). The correlations between the two scales are extremely high, indicating that the differences between the two instruments are negligible.

Cronbach's alpha reliabilities were computed independently by sex for each individual subscale and for the entire aggregate scale on both the PASPH and PASNP scales and the new RBRS scale (see Table 2). The results

TABLE 1 Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Mean Abuse Category Subscale Scores and Mean Aggregate Score for Original Partner Abuse Scale: Nonphysical and Partner Abuse Scale: Physical Instrument and Relationship Behavior Rating Scale Instrument

Categories of abuse	Women	Men
Psychological abuse	0.994	0.992
Coercive control	0.950	0.932
Physical abuse	0.971	0.976
Threatened and escalated physical violence	0.981	0.960
Sexual assault, intimidation, coercion	0.983	0.976
Total items	0.991	0.983

Note. All correlations significant at $p < .001$ level.

TABLE 2 Cronbach's Alpha Reliabilities for Abuse Category Subscale Scores and the Aggregate Scores for Original PASNP and PASPH Instrument and RBRS Instrument

Subscale	PASNP/PASPH	RBRS
	Raw scores	Raw scores
Women		
Psychological Abuse	0.891	0.908
Coercive Control	0.813	0.845
Physical Abuse	0.817	0.835
Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence	0.819	0.859
Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion	0.846	0.834
Aggregate score	0.934	0.943
Men		
Psychological Abuse	0.884	0.903
Coercive Control	0.770	0.799
Physical Abuse	0.834	0.872
Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence	0.722	0.788
Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion	0.570	0.659
Aggregate score	0.907	0.920

Note. PASNP = Partner Abuse Scale: Nonphysical; PASPH = Partner Abuse Scale: Physical; RBRS = Relationship Behavior Rating Scale.

TABLE 3 Criterion Validity: Correlations Between Abuse Categories With Mediators' Call of IPA Present for Original PASNP and PASPH Instrument and RBRS Instrument

Subscale	PASNP/PASPH	RBRS
	Mean raw scores	Mean raw scores
Women		
Psychological Abuse	0.293	0.295
Coercive Control	0.300	0.295
Physical Abuse	0.373	0.355
Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence	0.321	0.339
Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion	0.240	0.232
Aggregate Score	0.365	0.364
Men		
Psychological Abuse	0.235	0.232
Coercive Control	0.180	0.183
Physical Abuse	0.290	0.279
Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence	0.193	0.218
Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion	0.114	0.122
Aggregate Score	0.258	0.259

Note. PASNP = Partner Abuse Scale: Nonphysical; PASPH = Partner Abuse Scale: Physical; RBRS = Relationship Behavior Rating Scale.

indicate that both instruments are highly reliable. The RBRS outperformed the original scales on nearly every aggregate scale and individual subscale but the difference is negligible.

Criterion validity was calculated by correlating the scales from both the PASNP and PASPH and the RBRS with the mediators' dichotomous decision to designate the case as one with or without IPA (see Table 3). A more mixed picture emerged from these scores, with the RBRS outperforming the original scales on some subscales for one gender and not the other (Psychological Abuse reported by wives; Coercive Control reported by husbands) and outperforming the original scales for both sexes on Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence. Nevertheless, the criterion validity results were comparable because the magnitudes of these differences were relatively small.

Item Response Theory

Constrained models in the RBRS had lower fit indexes (i.e., higher Akaike's Information Criteria) than the PASNP and PASPH for total scores and scores on each subscale (see Table 4). However, the information provided by new items did substantially increase the information provided on the initial constructs for IPA for each sex. Of greatest interest is the shift in fit indexes for the four aggregate scale scores, one each for men and women in both the PASNP and PASPH and new RBRS forms (see Table 5). All fit indexes were based on the original latent construct computed from the aggregate scale

TABLE 4 Item Response Theory Analysis: Akaike's Information Criteria for Original PASNP and PASPH Instrument and RBRS

Subscale	PASNP/PASPH	RBRS
Women		
Psychological Abuse	16287.84	18687.48
Coercive Control	17013.51	28222.05
Physical Abuse	5128.83	6398.39
Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence	7274.76	11561.30
Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion	6290.47	7103.42
Aggregate score	53075.99	72408.52
Men		
Psychological Abuse	15786.53	18325.33
Coercive Control	15656.31	26761.54
Physical Abuse	4784.25	6540.07
Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence	4353.47	7575.98
Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion	3036.43	3518.41
Aggregate score	43922.55	68247.68

Note. PASNP = Partner Abuse Scale: Nonphysical; PASPH = Partner Abuse Scale: Physical; RBRS = Relationship Behavior Rating Scale.

TABLE 5 Item Response Theory Analysis: Total Information for Original PASNP/PASPH Instrument and the RBRS

Subscale	PASNP/PASPH	RBRS
Women		
Psychological Abuse	37.79	51.7
Coercive Control	23.92	35.07
Physical Abuse	27.39	78.6
Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence	57.26	69.83
Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion	26.39	37.1
Aggregate score	119.86	162.15
Men		
Psychological Abuse	38.39	49.03
Coercive Control	20.29	32.98
Physical Abuse	46.65	72.14
Threatened and Escalated Physical Violence	19.78	27.67
Sexual Assault, Intimidation, and Coercion	26.39	37.1
Aggregate score	102.95	142.16

Note. PASNP = Partner Abuse Scale: Nonphysical; PASPH = Partner Abuse Scale: Physical; RBRS = Relationship Behavior Rating Scale.

score of the PASNP and PASPH instrument. A decrease in parsimony would be expected, given the new items have likely extended the original construct to a more inclusive one that provides more information about the phenomenon of IPA surrounding the initial stages of the divorce. Indeed, extended knowledge about IPA was learned with subscales, even though the parsimony was reduced by the addition of items. In particular, the model for women's reported physical abuse was extended, as was the model for

both men's and women's Coercive Control as compared to the original items that comprised that subscale.

DISCUSSION

The results clearly show that the RBRS is comparable with the PASNP and PASPH. The two instruments correlate above .90 with a p value of less than .05 on all subscales. The interitem reliabilities for wife and husband reports on all subscales are also very high. We are confident that the new, revised instrument is not only as reliable as the previous scale, but also more inclusive, capturing important abusive behaviors that might not have been as clearly defined the past, as evidenced by providing more information on all subscales. In particular, women's increased information about Physical Abuse and the increase in information provided by the Coercive Control subscale for both sexes seem to fit intuitively with more recent studies in the literature specifying coercive control as an important motivating factor for other types of abuse and the reciprocal nature of physical abuse.

Although this sample is quite large, it represents a very particular population of adults: those who are currently undergoing a divorce, and even more particularly experiencing disagreements regarding either custody or parenting time of the children. Therefore, this is a more highly contentious population than would be expected in the general adult population. A new sample and testing are suggested in the future to calibrate answers to the new revised latent construct suggested by the new expanded test form.

Future research will use the RBRS to assist in screening divorcing couples participating in court-mandated mediation for IPA. This instrument can assist mediation professionals in understanding the specific types of abuse experienced by victims and can identify possible motivating factors for the abuse (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2008; Tanha et al., in press).

NOTE

1. The term *intimate partner abuse* is used because it is a broader term including physical and sexual violence, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and the newer conception of coercive control.

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